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Father John Chapman. What if Prayer Doesn't Come Easily?

For Religious Education

- (1) Things seems to work out better in life when a person prays regularly.
- (2) There is no one right way to pray, so a person ought to pray in a way that feels natural rather than forced.
- (3) Even when all kinds of prayer seem to be difficult or impossible God may be very close to us.

Dom John Chapman, a Benedictine Monk who lived in England from 1865 to 1933, is considered by many people to have been one of the greatest experts on prayer in the modern world.

Father Chapman, a convert from Anglicanism, gained his personal experience in prayer from his work as army chaplain on the European front in World War I, from his translations of the Bible for the Commission on the Vulgate in Rome, and from his vocation as Prior and later Abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Downside.

Fortunately, many of Father Chapman's writings about prayer still exist. Today we will look at some of his many letters written to lay men and lay women where he tried to show how prayer may become integrated into the busy pace of modern life.

In one letter, Father Chapman described his role as spiritual director to the laity: "As to direction, I think most people at the present day want very little of it. The good director is like a nurse who teaches children how to walk alone."

In spite of this humility in relation to his role as spiritual director, Dom John Chapman gave a great deal of extremely good advice. He says simply: "I recommend you prayer, because it is good for everybody, and our Lord tells us to pray."

Father Chapman also recommends that a person try to pray regularly: "The way to pray well is to pray much. If one has no time for this, then one must at least pray regularly. But the less one prays, the worse it goes."

The secret to being able to pray regularly is to find a place where one can be quiet. Some people find this simply in a Church, another before the Blessed Sacrament, others outdoors in nature, and another in a room at home. The main thing is to find a place which is easily accessible and which will allow us to close our eyes or ears to distractions for a few moments.

Dom John Chapman also recommends that a person should try to make a retreat once a year: " You will want some time for this prayer of contemplation---just as you can manage--- and a real retreat once a year...staying alone with God, distracted or not, as He pleases; after a time alone, all goes on oiled wheels for a time."

When it comes to the next question of how to pray during these times, Father Chapman offers some very concrete advice: " As to method, do what you can do, and what suits you."

In another letter he repeats this view: " The rule is simply: ---Pray as you can and do not try to pray as you can't. Take yourself as you find yourself , and start from that."

The key to prayer then is to simply place yourself in relation to God as you find yourself and then let God help you to grow in this relationship. Father Chapman says that for some people saying the words of vocal prayers comes easily, while others find it difficult to say vocal prayers. These people might find it more natural to remain in complete silence.

Then, still other people find it difficult to be silent because their minds seem so full of distractions. Father Chapman concludes that it is important not to force prayer, but to accept our situation as it reveals itself.

" One should wish for no prayer, except precisely the prayer that God gives us---probably very distracted and unsatisfactory in every way."

Even more important, a person ought not to worry too much about what level of prayer he or she is experiencing. Father Chapman writes: " We are not meant to ask ourselves whether we are beginners or advanced, or to find out. I hold to my view that we ought to try to do what we can and not what we can't."

Sometimes a person may become discouraged because he or she has tried to practice a kind of prayer recommended by a saint or some learned teacher in the Church. Father Chapman suggests to those he directs: " The advice I give is to renounce trying to do the impossible, and to take to the only kind of prayer which is possible."

The result of this acceptance of the self in relation to God is that a person enters into a kind of Holy Simplicity. The simplicity consists in accepting God's will for us in the depths of our heart. " Simplicity consists in keeping the whole soul subject to this ground or apex; and this sovereign point ...must be continually united to God's will."

So if we wish we could pray differently, or better, or in any other way than we naturally do pray, we are creating unnecessary anxieties and worries for ourselves.

For those people who do try to pray as Father Chapman recommends and still find that they are very unsatisfied and feel 'dried up', this spiritual advisor has some special advice. He recognizes this feeling as common to the modern world: " The trial of our contemporaries seems to be the feeling of not having any faith,...a mere feeling that religion is not true...It is very unpleasant."

He suggests to a person who feels this way that even though it may seem paradoxical, "the only remedy is to despise the whole thing and pay no attention to it---except (of course) to assure our Lord that one is ready to suffer from it as long as He wishes."

Dom Chapman uses many metaphors to describe this painful state of the feeling of the absence of God in prayer: "If you are carried in our Lord's arms, you will seldom see his face." Or, "You are the block, God is the sculptor; you cannot know what he is hitting you for, and you never will in this life. All you want is patience, trust, confidence, and He does it all. It is very simple---simplicity itself."

This kind of prayer to God, even in the situation where a person feels the absence of God, is a sure way to learn humility: "Some day you may find the acts of love stops. It has gone---you can't find it. God is hidden. Then you take that as His Will, and do the best you can in darkness and humility."

Even further, Dom Chapman suggests: "If God does not wish us to have peace, we must be satisfied with confusion, and that is peace, of an elusive kind." In all cases we ~~must~~ simply accept what God sends us and realize that to want to pray is to pray.

Finally, Father Chapman believes that prayer, even the most dissatisfying kind, produces some fruit. "I am sure good prayer ~~must~~ increase tenderness and appreciation,...and I am sure there is an irradiation from prayer."

In this situation, the good effects of prayer will not be directly felt by us but rather by those we love. So we can feel confident that even if prayer does not come easily to us, that it is still a gift from God and worth trying as we can within the natural circumstances of our lives.

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